

# ***BOMB***

## **MARIE TOMANOVA**

Naomi Falk  
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Marie Tomanova, *In Dad's Sweater (All That Is Left)*, 2018. All images courtesy of the artist.

When I first encountered Marie Tomanova's photographs of young New Yorkers—images capturing big, untampered personalities at play and in love—I was immediately drawn to her work. It felt as if these were portals into selfhood, kaleidoscopic and bold. Also, the photographs corresponded to my own experience as I recognized familiar faces from time spent enveloped in the smoke and shadows of the city that never sleeps.

Tomanova was raised in a small town in the Czech Republic and has been living in New York City for the last decade. She's exhibited her photographs internationally since 2015, and has published three monographs since then. In 2021, she was shortlisted for the Louis Roederer Discovery Award.

*It Was Once My Universe*, her most recent book, which features photos taken in her hometown, was released by the Japanese publisher Super Labo this September. Somber colors prevail throughout the volume, and chasmic ripples of emotional experiences stir at the core of the photographs. Turning the pages is to partake in the artist's journey home, which also involves asking, How does photography alter memories that we once held as truths?

We conducted this conversation as Tomanova traveled from Prague to Tokyo to celebrate the book's publication.

—Naomi Falk

**Naomi Falk: The photos in *It Was Once My Universe*, taken in the small Czech town you grew up in, constitute a quiet memoir of the familial and domestic. Can you tell me about the process of making the book?**

**Marie Tomanova:** This body of work is very personal and meaningful to me because it represents my first time returning home to Mikulov in over eight years. While I had planned to shoot photographs during my time there, I did not expect the experience of being home to be so full of conflicting feelings. Taking photographs was a way of dealing with and processing those feelings.

What I had thought of as a familiar place was suddenly unfamiliar, precious, and confusing. Nothing seemed to have changed—as if time had stood still for eight years. It was as if I had just left to buy a quart of milk, only that when I came back everyone was older and the kids were taller. And I felt like I didn't belong anymore. That sense of not belonging hit me very hard because this was my home. All these feelings clashed but when I was taking photographs, I was able to see things in a different way. I was in the moment, both emotionally distanced or removed but at the same time marveling at how close I was. The experience was overwhelming, so to be behind the camera was a way of staying out of the confusion. Taking pictures was a way of touching what was around me, my home, my family, and the spaces I once knew so well. Growing up, those spaces were my entire universe.

**NF: We live in a time of global migration, and many people are being uprooted and removed from what they know, often involuntarily. Your project touches on something very common nowadays—although you do have the privilege of returning, one that most refugees don't have.**

**MT:** The work is universal in a sense. It is about leaving home for the unknown. *Universe* is also shaped by extreme cultural differences between the East and West; the family-focused life on a small farm with its everyday rhythms tied to nature versus the extreme consumerism and individualistic approach to life in New York City and in the US in general. This contrast is an experience that I think a lot of immigrants go through.



*Was It Just a Dream?*, 2019, published in *It Was Once My Universe*, 2022.

**NF:** It takes a long time to adjust to a different culture. How did you make the selection for the final book?

**MT:** I shot for three weeks in December 2018 and January 2019. It was a short period of time that produced fewer than twenty rolls of film, so once I was back in New York the selection process was very organic. I picked the images that made me feel a certain way, almost like looking at pictures of my own dreams.

Altogether, the selection was far simpler than it has been with other series, such as *Young American* (2019) or *New York New York* (2021), in which there was a much larger number of photographs and more of a guided direction or theme or clear sense of what the image needed to convey. Those photographs of people and urban environments had to somehow fit together—they were a social landscape. For *It Was Once My Universe*, the images didn't have to fit with others or into an overall context; they had to evoke a feeling or memory for me and preserve that for the future.

**NF:** How did you feel about exposing a body of work that is so much about your own history?

**MT:** I was very uncomfortable releasing these images because they are so close to me, so close to home, of home; they reveal my background, and that made me feel vulnerable. As time passes, the meaning changes, though. The images that I thought showed my sense of displacement started feeling precious and tender.



*Self Portrait (Shadow), 2018, published in It Was Once My Universe, 2022.*

**NF:** The self-portraits in your “universe” capture two forms of distance. One is generated by the transformation of self that occurred after you left Mikulov and moved to the US. The other happened as you confronted your own expectations during your visit home, perhaps noticing a wrinkle on a loved one’s face or searching for an object you remembered in your childhood home and not finding it. The photographs show ambivalence. You were still parsing how you felt while you were taking pictures. I find that very intriguing.

**MT:** Yes, the photographs are reflections on distance. And on displacement, but also emplacement, environment, being, and memory. It’s a combination of all these concepts. The images encapsulate my experience of being between times and spaces. In a sense, the whole thing was an out-of-body experience. I was both a spectator (first at home and then looking back at the experience), but I was also strangely close to it. That was the tension for me while taking the photographs and then making the book.

**NF:** Did your identity as a photographer conflict with your identities as a daughter, friend, observer, a child of Mikulov?

**MT:** I am not sure that I can answer this question. It gets to the heart of what the book is about. When I first arrived home, I didn’t see myself as any of those things, or maybe I saw myself as all of them, but also everything else that I became in those eight years away from home. This is why the work is so important to me.

In a way, my family saw me as the girl I was before I left eight years prior, but I didn’t know how to fit into that role because I felt I had become a different person. I had to find out how to fit myself into the family dynamics, and photographing was part of that process.

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*Mom's Coat*, 2018, published in *It Was Once My Universe*, 2022.

You ask about identity. I see it as both fluid and fixed. It moves and changes but there is also a core that takes on shifting shades. When I first moved to New York City, I saw everything through the eyes of my small Czech family farm, but when I went back to Mikulov—and this is what disoriented me so much—I saw it through the eyes of New York City. The photographs show this instability of experience, but this is also brought up against the notion of home as a place. Or as a feeling, or as a past, or a present. I was home, but it didn't feel like home. That shocked me.

**NF:** *New York New York* and *Young American* are two recent bodies of work that explore the multiplicity of people and social scenes in New York City. As the photographer you are in on the jokes, the secrets, and the stories related to your encounter. There's trust. We sense this through the affection in your subjects' gazes, in the expansiveness of their poses. *Universe* rings with a similar sense of familiarity or intimacy.

**MT:** I don't think about my work in *New York New York* and *Young American* as "cool" as much as I think of it as intimate—or looking for connection. I have felt like an outsider ever since I came to the United States. Cultural assimilation is a very difficult thing. For example, my American friends talk about bands, movies, and TV shows, and many cultural references that are far from my experience. So I often don't feel a part of the conversation; it's like they are speaking a different language or cultural code. Even after living here for a decade, it is still true. My experience is an immigrant experience. I have come, and I work. I want the dream.

All my work is about intimacy, being close, eliminating distance between myself and others—and ultimately about eliminating distance between you, the viewer, and others. My photographs are about closeness, connection and togetherness, empathy, understanding, humanness—about seeing ourselves in others. They are about eliminating the judgement of others and about acceptance of others, and they're ultimately about self-acceptance and freedom. They are about loving others and yourself. For me, they are about a social landscape of belonging.



*Family Picture* c. 1997, 2018, published in *It Was Once My Universe*, 2022.

**NF:** I think that is why your works are speaking to so many people, especially young people. We seek genuine connection and deep, multifaceted understanding of others. We want to locate ourselves within a shared experience, and many of your New York City photos present moments that I want to carry forward.

**MT:** The photographs for *Universe* were taken the same year as the ones for *Young American*. Looking back on the two projects, they are similar in that each was and is about belonging and about how and where we, or I, belong. In that way, they almost mirror one another—but I only have this perspective now that I'm looking back.

I moved to the US in 2011 after I got my MFA as a painter in Brno. I think of my teenage years in Czech Republic as unstable and vulnerable, but also passionate and real. And I remember how I couldn't see past it. Can any of us? When we are in the moments of living, we don't reflect in the same way we can reflect later, in retrospect.

My new project will likely be involving images I shot in Czech Republic before leaving for the US. I began to show a tiny portion of it in 2017 under the title *Live for the Weather*. Lately, I've begun to expand on it. I had a show in Brno at OFF/Format Gallery in July 2022, and I put some more of this work together as a video installation called *Youth Is Dark*. That is the direction I am heading—my world growing up in a small Czech town in the mid-2000s. The Wall was down in theory, but in so many ways it was still there and still is. Thinking—the ways people think—takes so long to change. It is a powerful thing.

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